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AUTHOR Gollwitzer, Peter M.
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ABSTRACT

Observation suggests that people who strive for personally important goals disregard failure experiences or disruptions to completing a self-definition and engage in self-symbolizing in the form of positive self-descriptions designed to cover up a lack of support for the self-definition. To examine this self-symbolizing, dyads of females (N=30) committed to the self-definition of female professional completed an adjective pair questionnaire and subsequently received false feedback: support for the female professional self-definition was added or removed. Each dyad member was then given the chance to produce more positive self-descriptions than her partner. Results showed that females who had received negative feedback about themselves as professionals produced more positive self-descriptions. In a second experiment, subjects committed to the self-definitional goal of raising a family either expected to receive, or did or did not receive social recognition for their self-descriptions. Results showed that those whose self-descriptions were not recognized engaged in more self-symbolizing than those who either expected to or did receive recognition. The findings suggest that social reality is a stablizing factor when people strive for self-defining goals. (MCF)

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Symbolic Self-Completion and the Maintenance of Self-Defining Goals

Peter M. Gollwitzer

Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Mailing address: Peter M. Gollwitzer
Psychologisches Institut
Ruhr-Universität Bochum
D-4630 Bochum 1
Fed. Rep. Germany

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Symbolic self-completion and the maintenance of self-defining goals

Peter M. Gollwitzer

Ruhr-Universität Bochum, FRG

It is a common observation that people who pursue goals which they consider to be important and self-relevant--like being fluent in a foreign language, being an academic psychologist, a parent, and so forth --hold on to such goals even when failure experiences are encountered. The student of Spanish, for instance, does not switch to studying Latin simply because taking an advanced Spanish course turned out to be a premature decision. And the academic psychologist does not turn his back to academics when a manuscript prepared for publication is rejected. Similarly, a female with the self-defining goal of becoming a mother will not turn into a career woman simply, because she runs into difficulties in finding an appropriate mate.

These and similar observations seem to suggest that people who strive for personally important goals disregard failure experiences or other disruptions along the road to completing a self-definition. But this is the wrong conclusion. Research conducted under the rubric of symbolic self-completion by Robert Wicklund and me (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, in press) shows that people whose self-definitional progress is hampered do indeed react to such experiences. But instead of abandoning the self-defining goal, we have generally found these people to engage in compensatory efforts, which were attempts to reconstruct the threatened self-definition. We have labeled these compensatory activities "self-symbolizing efforts".

Which form do these self-symbolizing efforts take? Self-defining goals--like the ones mentioned--incorporate numerous indicators of goal attainment. In principle, everything that potentially can indicate to

others a positive self-definitional status qualifies as symbol of a self-definition. Goal attainment regarding the self-definition of academic psychologist, for instance, can be indicated by acquiring a diploma from a graduate school, but also by having an official occupational position, a title, an office, a secretary, and so forth. Furthermore, the academic psychologist is not limited to these types of indicators that are relatively hard to obtain; as an alternative, one can go ahead and simply describe the self to others as a competent academic psychologist. In other words, one may make verbal self-descriptions that imply a claim of possessing the aspired-to self-definition. An example would be the psychologist who keeps telling others that he "always keeps probing for the core problems when conducting research" and that "it is especially the smart graduate students who enjoy to work with him!" Such self-aggrandizing assertions usually suffice for the purpose of indicating to others a positive self-definitional status as academic psychologist, and thus qualify as symbols of this self-definition.

It follows from the assumption that self-definitions are composed of a whole set of indicators of attainment that striving for self-defining goals is best described as the accumulation of relevant indicators or symbols. An important consequence is that the person who falls short on one indicator of an aspired-to self-definition is not forced to give up striving--which would be the case if self-definitions possessed only one single, unequivocal indicator of attainment. Rather, the lack of one indicator of goal attainment can potentially be substituted by an alternative indicator of goal attainment. Accordingly, symbolic self-completion theory postulates that people compensate for the experience of being disrupted in their self-definitional progress by substituting an alternative symbol of a self-definition for the symbol that is lost through disruption. These self-symbolizing efforts are, therefore, best described

as efforts to cover up a lack of symbolic support for a given self-definition through attaining alternative symbolic support.

An academic psychologist, for instance, who falls short in background experience, i.e., having attended a graduate school of only mediocre prestige, or having had a poor methodological training, and so forth, can always substitute by emphasizing symbols that are related to occupying a position, i.e., displaying one's title conspicuously. Or if one falls short in performing relevant acts such as teaching, conducting research, publishing, etc., then substitution can take the form of bragging about a first-class education--in case it exists. Or publishing might substitute for bad teaching and teaching excellence for bad publishing.

According to self-completion theory, symbols of a self-definition are mutually exchangable, and the disruption of self-definitional progress is said to set off this substitution process. This postulate is very much in line with Lewin's thinking about substiute activities. Lewin suggested that the tension set up by the interruption of an activity might propel the individual to a substitute activity that aims at tension reduction. Supporting Lewin's theorizing, his students found that subjects' interest in resuming an interrupted task was sharply curtailed when subjects were given the possibility of solving a substitute task. Similarly, we have shown for a variety of different self-definitions (e.g., athlete, Catholic, businessman, mathematician, vintner) and for a variety of different self-definitional symbols (e.g., positive self-descriptions, influencing and teaching others, displaying status symbols, associating with successful others) that attainment on one symbolic dimension leads to a reduced interest in self-symbolizing on an alternative dimension, and conversely, that being weak on one symbolic dimension leads to an increase in self-symbolizing on an alternative dimension.

It should be clear at this point that self-defining goals as conceived by symbolic self-completion theory are not highly general, in the sense of maintaining or reaching an overall positive self-evaluation or self-esteem. Rather they are related to relatively specific self-definitions, such as being a parent, psychologist, and so forth. Accordingly, self-completion theory postulates a compensatory process in the form of symbol substitution only within the symbolic realm of a specific self-definition, and not across self-definitions.

Moreover, these self-definitions are considered as having a motivational component. The individual with the self-definition of being a runner, for instance, is assumed to claim a potential of carrying out activities that are related to running, e.g., wearing appropriate clothes, associating with other runners, and so forth. Accordingly, a self-definition as viewed by symbolic self-completion theory is an ideal or goal set up by the individual.

Finally, it is crucial, before the substitution process to go into gear, that the individual is still striving for this ideal, i.e., the individual is pursuing progress regarding the self-definition in question. Otherwise, the disruption of self-definitional progress is not even experienced as such, and therefore, does not create the motivational condition or tension that could instigate self-symbolizing.

Let me describe to you an experiment that illustrates the phenomenon of self-symbolizing in the form of positive self-descriptions. Two female subjects were run at a time. At the onset of the semester it had already been established that subjects were highly committed to the self-definition of female professional. For this purpose they had to fill out a questionnaire with such items as "Imagine that for some un-

foreseen reason you would have to give up a professional career; how much would that bother you?"

In the first phase of the main experiment a presumed "personality psychologist" asked subjects to fill out a questionnaire consisting of 10 bipolar adjective pairs (e.g., warm - cold, independent - dependent). Once subjects had filled out the questionnaire they received false feedback. In the Ideal Profile condition subjects were told that their answers were very similar to the pattern or profile of answers found for successful female professionals; whereas in the Non-Ideal Profile condition subjects were said to be dissimilar to this ideal pattern of answers. In other words, subjects found that they had, or didn't have, the personality requirements that favor success as a female professional. In each session, one of the two subjects received Ideal Profile feedback, the other Non-Ideal Profile feedback.

The second phase of the experiment was explicitly disconnected from the first. The new experimenter was allegedly a social psychologist who purported to be interested in how people generate ideas about themselves in an interpersonal context. The subjects were seated facing the experimenter, and whenever the experimenter gave a signal they were to compete in expressing ideas about themselves. They were told that each time the experimenter signalled only the response of the faster subject would be recorded, whereas the idea of the slower subject would remain ignored. The experimenter also informed subjects that she planned to give exactly 7 signals, but that she would terminate the whole session, if for a certain signal none of the subjects responded with an idea.

There were two different conditions. In the Female Professional Issue condition the ideas subjects had to report about themselves were indicators of competence as a female professional, e.g., "I'm a great

organizer", or"I have experiences in a law firm". In the Motherhood Issue condition subjects had to report indicators of competence as a potential mother, e.g., "I get along with children easily".

In conceptual terms: In the first phase of the experiment symbolic support regarding subjects' self-definition of female professional was either removed or added. In the second part of the experiment, subjects in the Female Professional Issue condition were given a chance to self-symbolize. They simply had to come up with positive self-descriptions very quickly, i.e., they had to be faster than their partners. Based on the idea that falling short on one symbolic dimension leads to sustituting in the form of striving for alternative symbolic support, we expexted the Non-Ideal Profile subjects to dominate the Female Professional Issue session by trying to get more self-descriptions recorded than their Ideal Profile partners. However, positive self-descriptions related to the symbolic system of the self-definition of mother cannot be considered to be supportive for the self-definition of female professional. Accordingly, we did not expect Non-Ideal Profile subjects to engage more eagerly in positive self-descriptions than Ideal Profile subjects when it came to expressing ideas in the Motherhood Issue condition.

Table 1 about here

The data in Table 1 strongly support this hypothesis. When the topic of the session was female professional, 11 out of 15 Non-Ideal Profile subjects won the session, i.e., reported more self-descriptive phrases than their partners. On the other hand, the incomplete subjects tended to capitulate if the topic was such that positive self-descriptions could not provide symbolic support for their negatively affected self-defini-

tion of female professional.

This study shows that people who are committed to a certain self-definition--and we had taken steps to assure this commitment--compensate for an experienced symbolic lack by striving for alternative symbolic support within the realm of this self-definition. But there is more to self-completion theory than the postulate of a hydraulic relation between symbols of a self-definition.

Cooley and Mead, the major representatives of the symbolic interactionist school of thought, claim that a sense of oneself as a parent, businessperson, or any other self-definition comes about through the acknowledgement of others. A self-definition that is declared in the absence of this social acknowledgement is thought of as empty and without psychological permanence. Only to the degree that the community recognizes an individual's possessing a given self-definition is the individual able to identify himself in that manner.

These ideas suggest that the symbolic support for a self-definition is the more powerful or effective the more the implied symbols are recognized by others. In other words, feelings of attainment regarding a certain self-definition are stronger, the more the acquired symbolic support gains a social reality.

This idea can be tested by combining it with the substitution-of-symbols notion already discussed. This was in fact done in the following experiment: Subjects with an ongoing commitment to the self-definitional goal of raising a family were encouraged to make relevant positive self-descriptions. In the Actual Social Reality condition subjects found out that a partner subject had studied these self-descriptions carefully. In the Expected Social Reality condition subjects were told that a partner subject would--at some later point in time--study these self-descrip-

tions. In the No Social Reality condition subjects were made to believe that noone would ever look at their positive self-descriptions.

In a second, presumedly unrelated phase, subjects met an experimenter who introduced himself as a personality psychologist. As in the study already reported, he asked subjects to fill out a form containing 10 bipolar adjective pairs. The only difference was that the form already carried the pattern of answers which were described as ideal for the self-definition in question (i.e., mother). Actually, subjects were told that the profile they found drawn onto the questionnaire (see Figure 1) was typically observed among successful mothers.

Figure 1 about here

In more conceptual terms, the presumed personality psychologist provided subjects with a route to self-symbolizing, in the form of associating with what they thought to be an indicator of competence as mother. Subjects simply had to draw their own personality profile close to the ideal in order to indicate potential as a mother.

The predictions regarding subjects' filling out the personality questionnaire are as follows: If social recognition for self-symbolizing, in the form of positive self-descriptions, furthers a person's sense of self-definitional attainment, then subjects in the Actual and Expected Social Reality condition should show less interest in further self-symbolizing on the personality questionnaire--relative to the No Social Reality subjects. Consequently, for the Social Reality subjects, it should be easier to ignore the "ideal" profile when filling out the personality questionnaire, i.e., Actual and Expected Social Reality subjects will report their own personalities to be more dissimilar to the suggested ideal than will the No Social Reality subjects.

Figure 2 about here

As can be seen from Figure 2 this hypothesis was strongly supported. When one squares the differences between the subject's answer and the "ideal" answer for each item and then adds these scores over the 10 items, one ends up with a measure of dissimilarity to the ideal. As predicted, No Social Reality subjects showed lower scores on this index than Actual and Expected Social Reality subjects. In other words, subjects whose self-descriptions in the first phase of the experiment did not get recognized by others moved their answers closer to the ideal, thus engaging in more self-symbolizing than subjects who actually received such recognition, and also more than subjects who expected such recognition.

It appears then that social reality is a stabilizing factor when people strive for self-defining goals. Once social recognition is obtained or expected for an acquired relevant symbol, the individual sees less of a necessity of procuring further, additional symbolic support for the aspired-to self-definition.

To summarize: People who are committed to such self-defining goals as being a mother, a psychologist, or a career woman, do not abandon such goals simply because they experience a relevant shortcoming. Rather, our research showed that these people do compensate by substituting an alternative symbol for the one that is lacking.

Furthermore, social recognition for acquired symbolic support of a self-definition seems to make people more secure in having attained a positive self-definitional status. Thus the substitution mechanism and the factor of social reality, taken together seem to further the maintaining of self-defining goals.

There remains the question of what makes people change their self-defining goals? In other words, when do people stop striving for a certain self-definition?

We have not addresses these questions empirically yet, but the self-completion notion allows us to formulate a number of hypotheses. One can easily conceive of people who are interrupted in their self-definitional progress but fail to substitute successfully through alternative symbols. The reasons for this may be either that alternative symbols are not accessible, or that no social reality is forthcoming for the individual's self-symbolizing. In either case, the individual will sooner or later stop striving for the once-aspired-to self-definition.

Also, there may be a case of uncommitting that operates by different principles. An individual who develops a commitment to a new self-definition might find--after the new commitment is already established--that this new self-definition is in direct contradiction to a prior one. The conflict is solved by abandoning one of the conflicting self-definitions. For example: A female leaves highschool with the ideal of being married and having children, but when she leaves college nothing matters more to her than having an interesting job.

Finally, there might be the case of the person who becomes overly complete regarding the self-definition to which there has been a commitment for many years. Every conceivable symbolic support has been attained: in other words, there is nothing left to strive for, and therefore, there is a new commitment to a new challenging self-defining goal. But it is hard for me to believe that this is a very frequent case; it may just be that we invent such heroes as a kind of personified ideal that keeps the rest of us striving.

References

Wicklund, R.A., & Gollwitzer, P.M. Symbolic self-completion. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, in press.

Table 1

Frequencies of Pairs in Which the Non-Ideal Profile Subject Wins, Loses, or Ties

Issue	Outcome for non-ideal profile subject		
	Winning	Tying	Losing
Female professional	11	2	2
Motherhood	4	4	7

PERSONALITY PROFILE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please indicate your standing on the following personality traits.
Circle the appropriate number between each pair of adjectives below.

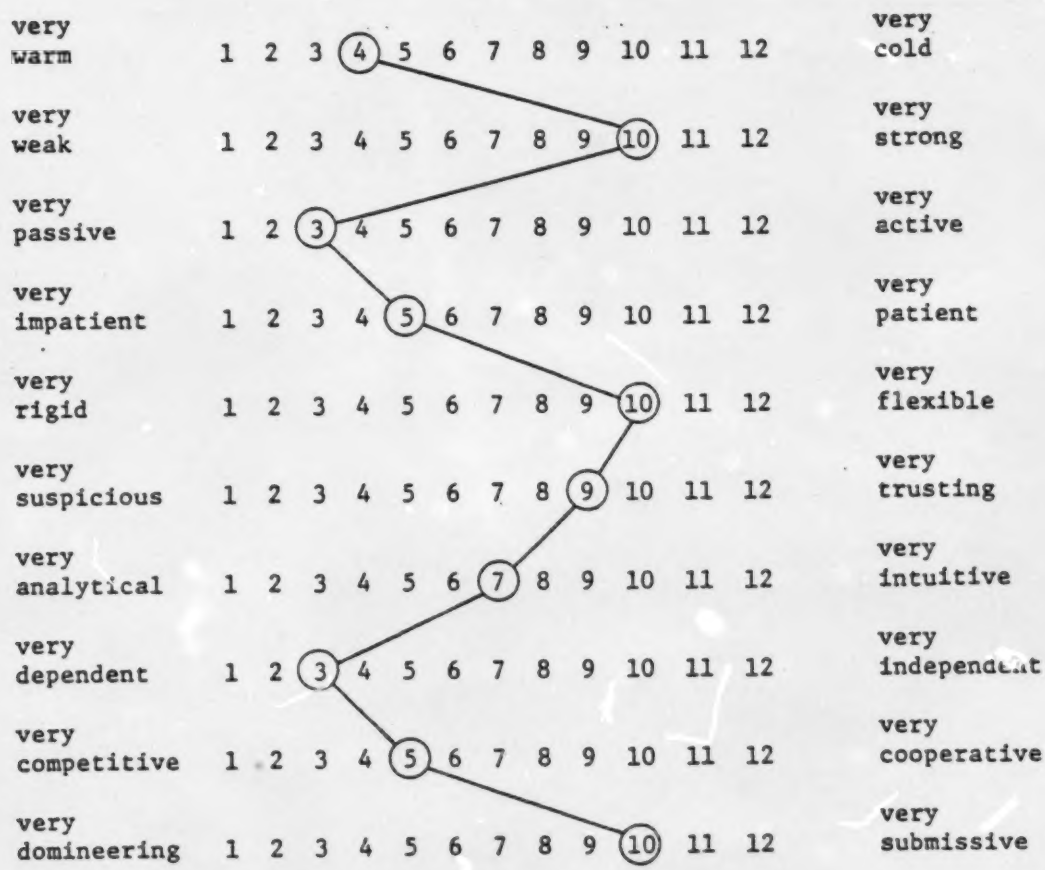
very warm 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very cold
very weak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very strong
very passive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very active
very impatient 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very patient
very rigid 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very flexible
very suspicious 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very trusting
very analytical 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very intuitive
very dependent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very independent
very competitive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very cooperative
very domineering 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 very submissive

Figure 1. DEPENDENT MEASURE: PERSONALITY QUESTIONNAIRE WITH "IDEAL" PERSONALITY PROFILE

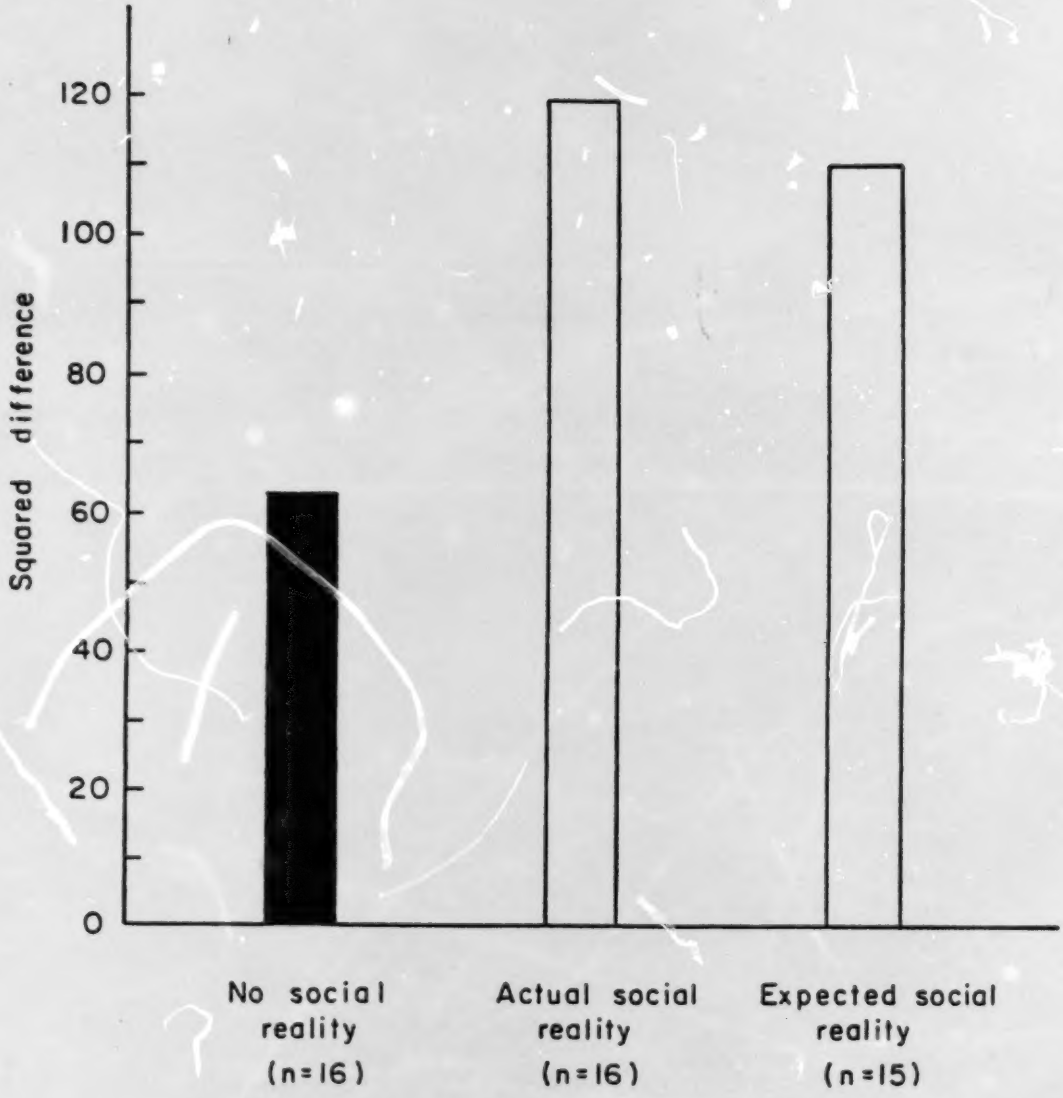

Figure 2. MEAN DISSIMILARITY OF OWN PERSONALITY PROFILE TO THE "IDEAL" PROFILE (Squared Difference Index)